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Kremlin Crystal Ball Cloudy to Experts

The spook's lot is not a happy one. He is expected to predict what is going to happen, and if he doesn't, his job is on the line.

Of all the government's intelligence analysts, those who try to figure out what the old men in the Kremlin are up to probably have the worst job. They are supposed to give the president reliable information — when even the Russian leaders don't know which end is up.

So it's understandable that our intelligence people — in the CIA, the State Department and the Defense Intelligence Agency — tend to take an on-the-one-hand-this, on-the-other-hand-that line with their Kremlinological studies.

That's the way the intelligence community has handled the Reagan administration's question: Who will succeed leader Leonid I. Brezhnev?

Our Kremlin watchers hoped that Brezhnev might give them some enlightenment at the recent Communist Party conference. It would have been unprecedented for him to announce his heir apparent, but they had hopes.

Brezhnev, of course, did not lay hands on a successor. In the dog-eat-dog tradition of the Soviet hierarchy, none of the "first among equals" has weakened his position of supremacy by naming the man he wants to succeed him. From Lenin on, they have been realistic enough to realize that succession depends on the political skill of the contenders for power.

So the experts in the CIA, Pentagon and State Department stuck to the safe road. They didn't name a single preeminent candidate to fill the 74-year-old Brezhnev's boots, a course that might get them in trouble if they guessed wrong. Instead, they gave President Reagan a choice.

My associate Dale Van Atta has seen the experts' analyses, and here's what they have told the White House:

- Konstantin Chernenko is the favorite of many Kremlin handicappers — but only as a transitional figure. Chernenko, 69, is an old buddy of Brezhnev's, dating to the early '50s when they served together in Moldavia.

Chernenko skyrocketed in the Kremlin bureaucracy, becoming a full member of the 14-man Politburo in November 1978. At that point, the CIA learned from a well-placed Soviet spy that "the elevation of Chernenko to full Politburo status means he is being groomed by Brezhnev as his successor." But the spy conditioned Chernenko's grab for the brass ring on Brezhnev's ability to hang on for "several more years."

So Chernenko is the man, right? Wrong. Except for his close association with Brezhnev, he has no independent power base. "We believe Chernenko's addition to the Politburo was designed to enhance Brezhnev's own power position," the CIA said.

- Andrei Kirilenko is another ranking Politburo member, who has known Brezhnev for 30 years. As the Communist Party's organizational secretary, he presumably has the support of many party professionals whom he has put in positions of power.

So Kirilenko is the man? Not necessarily, according to the Kremlinologists. The abrupt dismissal of his protégé, Yakov Ryabov, as party secretary in early 1979 might have been "an attack on Kirilenko's position," according to a DIA cable.

Who, then? "There undoubtedly are many younger men who have become increasingly restive at their inability to advance themselves because of the gerontocracy," a State Department analysis concludes. "They know that they will rise only in part because of what they know as opposed to whom they know, for some of the most important Soviet-style political battles are fought on the patronage front."

What all this speculation means for the United States is as murky as the predictions of Brezhnev's successor. Some analysts figure it's a choice between hard-liners and soft-liners in the Kremlin. Other analysts say this is horsefeathers.

In the end, it all boils down to Winston Churchill's observation: "Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."